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TRAINING FOR TEACHING COMPOSITION IN COLLEGES

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One of the most perplexing problems connected with the teaching of college English grows out of the fact that a course in composition is required of first-year students in nearly all universities and colleges. This course is considered, naturally enough, to be more elementary in character than courses open to upper-classmen, and by its very nature makes demands upon an instructor's time not made by the latter courses. For these reasons it is generally taught almost exclusively by young men who are just entering the teaching profession. The amount of labor required to read the themes of the large number of students enrolled makes it necessary that the greater part of the time of these instructors, if not their whole time, should be given to this work. It is a fairly safe estimate, I believe, to say that three-fourths of the men beginning the teaching of college English now enter through this avenue.

It would seem to follow naturally that the preparation of the would-be teacher to do this work should concern not a little those who are directing his graduate study. This is especially true when one considers that courses in composition are rather sharply differentiated from other work in English in their subject-matter, their aim, and their method. It is, of course, wholly illogical to assume that the instructor should be especially fitted for this duty

to the exclusion of all others, simply because it is the first imposed upon him. But the work is unique and the attitude of the college authorities shows the importance attached to it. Furthermore, the instructor in most instances must win his spurs here, if he is to be given the opportunity he covets so much of offering courses in his special field of English study. Occasionally men are relieved of the burden of Freshman composition, and given advanced courses in literature for no other reason than that they have failed at the supposedly simpler task. By an inverse sort of logic, which used to be much more prevalent among us than it is now, it is assumed that if a man cannot teach beginners he must therefore be especially qualified to instruct older students. Whether or not they have come to realize the fallacy of this reasoning, administrative officers in English departments appreciate the fact that no department can long be run on the principle that those who do elementary work cheerfully, conscientiously, and efficiently should be kept at it indefinitely, while the shirkers and inefficient grumblers are practically promoted for incompetence.

For these reasons, students who are looking forward to the teaching of English, as well as those who are to be held responsible for their appointments to college positions, should carefully scrutinize the training which our graduate schools are giving for this work. If one asks how far they recognize that this is a special field, calling for distinct courses, the answer is simple: practically not at all. Part of the defects in the preparation of our teachers of composition spring from this source; but many come from more general causes.

College life is becoming constantly more attractive to certain types of young men because of the opportunities it offers for scholarly study and research, for literary activity, and for public lecturing, to say nothing of the social prestige which comes to a man—and to his wife—from his connection with a college faculty. Moreover, although the salary is modest, it is nevertheless dependable. These men may not have any particular desire to teach, or any reason to suspect that they have unusual ability along this line. It is this, combined with the fact that although it is easy enough to get a man into a college, it is next to impossible to get him out, unless

his weakness becomes a public scandal, which has led me to believe that those looking forward to a career as college teachers should be urged to spend at least a year in secondary-school work before doing intensive graduate study. In all our discussions, we are rather inclined to overlook the fact that for approximately forty years a man's chief work, at least that which will occupy the greater portion of his time, will be the teaching of students. I can imagine nothing more deadening for the man himself, nor for the unfortunate students who may come to him, than that he should enter upon this task for the sake of the pleasure he will take in the by-products of his work. More and more the Doctor's degree is coming to be regarded merely as a certificate of one's preparation for teaching. Would it not be wise to insist that men should test their own powers, or at least prove the wisdom of their choice, before becoming candidates for it?

This is true equally of many other lines of work besides English. But English composition demands, more than most subjects, that men should come to it with high qualifications as far as teaching ability is concerned, and with unmistakable enthusiasm for the work. The body of fact which the instructor is called upon to impart to the student is not large. There is little opportunity for him to demonstrate his skill in that curiously anomalous performance known as the college lecture. The purpose of the course is not so much to convey information as to give training. Furthermore, a college course in history which is admittedly good for one college may be transplanted to another without any appreciable loss in efficiency. Not so with a course in composition; this must be adapted to the interests of the students as shaped by their natural preferences, their home life, their general reading, and their previous condition of high-school servitude.

The teacher of even elementary courses in composition cannot rely on a textbook, nor resort to the favorite device of instructors in other beginning classes, of assigning "the next fifteen pages." To borrow a figure from De Quincey, he, like the spider, is compelled to spin his web out of his own bowels. Nowhere else is such great demand made upon the personality of the teacher. Unless he has the homiletic habit, the evangelistic spirit which impels

him to teach, unless he has in the words of the earlier theology "received the call," then it were well that he look elsewhere.

The whole process of composition-teaching seems to be the exact reverse of that which now prevails in most other subjects. The function of the teacher in these seems to be to serve as a funnel through which a certain amount of information, whether in the form of specific facts or general principles, shall be conveyed into empty—and often leaky—vessels. The teacher of composition must, however, evoke the expression of the student's opinion. He must be provocative rather than didactic.

So far as I am aware, few attempts have been made to train students definitely for their work as college teachers of English. Although there have been, for a number of years, teachers' training courses for those who are to go into secondary-school work, Professor Greenough, of Harvard, established the first such course for graduate students only three years ago. In an article in the January number of the *English Journal* for 1913, he gave an interesting account of his experiment in attempting to train students to be teachers of English composition.

Whether the plan of establishing special courses in method will solve the problem remains to be seen. It may be that we cannot expect successfully to combine graduate study with instruction in pedagogy. But there is one thing that we have a right to demand. At the present time, a student who is admitted to candidacy for the Doctor's degree takes it for granted that the department is willing to recommend him for a college teaching position. Either students must be given to understand that the Doctor's degree does not carry with it any license to teach, or else by a process of selection the unfit must be gradually eliminated. If one cannot tell who will prove the successful teacher, at least it ought not to be difficult to decide who has no chances of success. We must cease to regard teaching as a safe refuge for those with certain intellectual gifts, but without the personality to make their mark in any other profession.

The natural comment that would be made, by three-fourths of our college teachers, on what I have said, would be, "Very true, but you cannot expect us to give students personality. We cannot

'make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.' " And yet some artistic and serviceable articles are made out of pigskin. The diamond in the rough may prove an efficient research scholar, but he ought to be polished before he is put in charge of Freshmen in the classroom. As one of my colleagues expressed it: "The very least we may expect of a teacher of English is that he should be a gentlemen." Indifference to personal appearance, uncouthness of manners, provincialism in speech, inconsiderateness of the rights and feelings of others, unless they are amenable to the influence that should be found in our colleges, certainly ought to prove a bar to a recommendation to teach. I can unfortunately testify from my own experience that such is not the case. Graduate faculties in English not only encourage men to prepare themselves for teaching, but also recommend them for positions, when their very presence in a classroom is a flagrant offense to the good taste of students, which in some of its more important phases it is the function of English to develop.

Personally, I much prefer the right sort of man with but a limited amount of graduate training to the man who has nothing but brilliance and a Doctor's degree to recommend him. But this is not belittling the Doctor's degree. Other things being equal, or nearly equal, it is much in a man's favor that he has gained it. The severe mental discipline which comes from the working out of a dissertation cannot but make a person more rigorous in his own thinking and consequently less tolerant of slovenliness of thought in others. Furthermore, a Doctor's degree signifies that one is conversant, in a general way at least, with the entire field of study in which it is granted. This is true of English, as well as other subjects, and in so far the Doctor's degree in English is an asset to the teacher of English composition.

I question, however, the value, either as a contribution to knowledge or as a preparation for teaching, of much of the research that is done in the name of English. The earlier insistence on philological investigation, with its collateral training in mediaeval Latin, Middle High German, Old French, Early Norse, has given way in part to the not less narrow grubbing at literary relationship. Every author may be suspected of indebtedness—amounting to

unconscious plagiarism—to other writers of whom there is no positive evidence that he ever heard. Not only every author, but every single work furnishes a problem in research for some aspiring tracer of literary genealogies. I have no objection to this sort of thing, but rather to the fact that our graduate study in English has been conventionalized along these lines. Regardless of the student's personal preference, or of the kind of work he may wish to do afterward, he is run through the mill. This sort of training is not likely to prove half so beneficial to a teacher of composition as research in economics, political science, or philosophy. The trouble with our graduate work in English is that it has fallen into a rut. The research that men are engaged in is so far divorced from their actual needs as teachers that in many cases the training is not only not positively beneficial, but may even be harmful in its effects.

The college teacher constantly complains about the preparation of the students who come to him from the secondary schools. They have been given superficial notions about literary movements, and have learned to speak oracularly about books they have never read, but are left in total ignorance of the nature of a sentence. Their spelling would embarrass even the Simplified Spelling Board, and the whole theory of punctuation still remains in worlds beyond their ken. The high-school teacher is simply doing that which his college training has fitted him to do. In like manner, one finds that doctors of philosophy who have spent the greater part of their graduate work delving in the field of Anglo-Saxon verb forms, or in attempting to discover the sources or fix the date of some tale of Chaucer, do not approach with equanimity of spirit, to say nothing of enthusiasm, the task of teaching college Freshmen, or even more mature students, how to give expression to rather simple ideas. They ask cogently, "Why should I spend three or four years of my time in graduate study in order that I may do this?" They wish to proceed to the teaching of seminar courses for graduate students at once. As they are unable to do this because certain estimable but inefficient old gentlemen, out of sheer obstinacy, refuse to die or to retire, they resign themselves to the task before them with the feeling that a thirteen-inch gun

has been brought into action to kill a sparrow. Work done in such a spirit cannot but be inefficient.

The fact of the matter is that their whole training, both undergraduate and graduate, has been such as to give them a notion that courses in composition are little more than a necessary evil. As undergraduates they are required to take one course in composition, and in certain colleges they are excused from that, as though there were a possible danger in being able to write too well. In their graduate work the insistence upon the importance of other phases of English study, by implication at least, confirms their opinion of the relative unimportance of the art of writing. As Professor Greenough points out in his paper setting forth the aims of his course, few graduate students in English write with any sense of style, and the majority express themselves crudely, if not inaccurately.

First of all, therefore, we should insist that graduate students in English should be able to write well themselves. To this end, at least a portion of their time should be devoted to a study under competent instruction as to how to improve their own writing. In the bulletin of one of our leading universities, I find that there are announced twenty courses in English primarily for graduates. Only two of these are courses in writing, one of them a course in dramatic technique, and the other a course in general composition. Perhaps this is sufficient, if students are encouraged to take this work as an essential part of their preparation for teaching.

But more significant is the fact that, of the seventeen courses dealing with literary forms and periods of literature, only two are devoted to a study of prose writers, and in only four others is prose studied, if one may judge from the published statements, as even an incidental feature. It is worth while to raise the question whether too great emphasis has not been laid on poetry, drama, and the novel as a prose epic, to the exclusion of the literary qualities of prose itself, to say nothing of that more pedestrian sort of prose which has been so influential in shaping the thoughts and destinies of men, and will continue so to be.

It is frequently stated that there is no such thing as graduate study in rhetoric. One might suppose that all investigation of the

principles governing effectiveness in writing and speaking had begun and ended with Aristotle. Yet Aristotle did little more than touch one small corner of the vast field. Our texts on rhetoric are filled with inaccurate, empirical generalizations which have been traditionally accepted without any attempt to verify them or to give the fundamental principles which underlie them. Is there any reason why these questions should not be opened to graduate study in English? Suppose they do take the student afield into prose works which have not acknowledged literary excellence? What if they do require that the investigator, if he is to offer any real solution of them, should be grounded in psychology and logic, even at the sacrifice of some philological training? Is not the field of English a broad one, and can we not make room in our graduate work for a study of those problems which inevitably confront the thoughtful teacher of English composition?

There are a certain number of our graduate students who are looking forward to the teaching of composition, and who wish to prepare themselves to be efficient in it. If opportunity were offered to these few to connect their graduate study more definitely with their after-work, we should have a number of teachers whose enthusiasm had not been diverted into other channels. But, further than this, there would be an immense gain from the recognition that the more practical phases of English study are really worth while, and that the teaching of composition is to be taken seriously. This is an acknowledgment which unfortunately has not been accorded it up to the present time.

In connection with the statement that graduate students should be taught how to write or at least required to write passably well, attention should be called to one of our leading universities, which requires that all its instructors in composition should be men who have themselves achieved some modest distinction as writers; by this is meant, of course, the field of *belles-lettres*. I hope I shall not be considered inconsistent if I venture the opinion that the most efficient teachers are not to be found among literary dilettanti in the fields of poetry, the drama, and the short story, or other forms of fiction. It may be that my experience has been unfortunate, but the only men whom I have personally known who had aspira-

tions as writers were lamentable failures as teachers of composition. It does not always follow that the most skilful creative workers in any art are the best teachers, even of that art itself. But even if they were, and even if one admits that the best way to inspire students to write is to place over them one who has shown some literary ability, I should still be rather dubious of the wisdom of such a plan. It certainly would seem little short of a calamity to have the hundreds of Freshmen in our colleges all aspiring to write poetry, drama, or stories.

Professor Lounsbury to the contrary notwithstanding, it is not the aim of training in composition to produce literary artists, nor should it be. To quote Professor Cunliffe: "The aim that we put before ourselves and before them [the students] is not to make literary artists, to produce Paters and Stevensons and Merediths, or even O. Henrys, but to enable the ordinary man to set forth such ideas as he has (or such facts as he needs to present) in an orderly and effective fashion, without mistakes in construction, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The aim is a modest one—some will say a humble one—but I believe it is worthy of the best endeavor of any intelligent man who aspires to be a college teacher."

Training in the literary types of composition should not make a man scornful of the humbler fields which it is our province to cultivate. Nor should a moderate success in imaginative writing blind him to the fact that the same instrument which he employs for literary purposes is used by the majority of his pupils for only the most utilitarian of ends. If the writer can but keep these facts in mind he may be all the better teacher, because no one should be more conscious of the fact that literature is a difficult and exacting art than those who have made modest but conscientious essays at it.

The fact that the aim of composition is so practical, so utilitarian, means that its subject-matter must be drawn from whatever students are, or may be, interested in and thinking about. This necessitates that the teacher who is to guide their thinking and the expression of their thoughts must have not only a wide range of interests but also a correspondingly wide range of information. There must be few subjects even though only a small number of

the sixty to one hundred students in his class have an intelligent opinion on them, that he is not well enough informed about to be at least an intelligent questioner. The ideal teacher of composition should, in addition to other qualities, have a catholic curiosity in regard to all the really worth-while phases of human thought and activity. For this reason, the man of limited experience, of few interests, and of highly specialized knowledge in some limited field is likely to find himself unhappy in teaching composition, not only because he will necessarily be ignorant of many things of paramount interest to students, but because he will also be bored by them. One of the most successful men in composition says that he would rather have as teachers men who have taken a large part of their work in history, philosophy, economics, and political science, than those who have specialized too narrowly in English.

It is this fact that has been largely responsible for the definite separation of English literature and English composition in many of our colleges. In some there are separate departments, in others separate staffs of instruction, for the two phases of the work. This separation is made more pronounced by the feeling on the part of certain men that such utilitarian work is unworthy of their own high gifts, and that the training they have received, if it has not made them unfit for it, has at least fitted them for higher things.

It is my personal opinion that the comparative ease of the task of teaching literature, of arousing enthusiasm in regard to works that have a perennial charm, accounts as much as anything for the great attraction this field has for all young men entering upon the teaching of college English. There is on the contrary no field which so quickly searches out a man's weakness, which puts his ingenuity and resourcefulness to so keen a test, which really proves his ability as a teacher so quickly, as English composition. Here more than elsewhere, the young instructor needs guidance and assistance. We are all too prone to consider that the training of the teacher ends when he begins the actual work of teaching. We who are responsible for directing the work of college classes in composition proceed upon the assumption that knowledge of teaching can be gained only through experience, that each one

must repeat all the mistakes, all the blunders, of his predecessors, and learn, if he ever learns, at the expense of the students entrusted to him.

There is much criticism of the inefficiency of our teaching of composition, of the insignificance of the result compared with the vast expenditure of time and energy devoted to it. In our colleges, at least, I feel that it springs in part from the fact that the older men confine their work to courses in literature, and that the courses in composition are generally taught by young men with no experience, or with very limited experience. Furthermore, they are put in charge of classes, and, without any sort of oversight or direction, or even competent advice, are left to work out their own destinies. In no other business in the world would such a waste of energy be tolerated. They are asked to learn to teach in the same way that boys used to learn to swim. They are thrown into deep water and are left to sink or to save themselves. There are a few who swim, there are a few more that manage to struggle out, they know not how, and forever after look with horror on composition. Many sink; a few are rescued by sympathetic friends, and never afterward venture out of the shallow but safer waters of courses in "literary appreciation."